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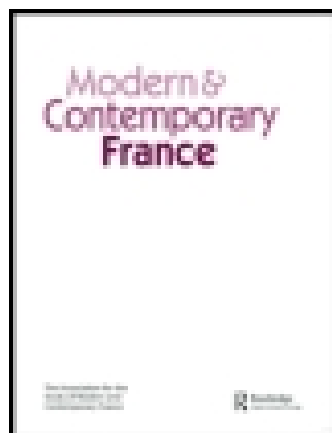


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# Saving the Republic: State Nostalgia and Slavery Reparations in Media and Political Discourses

Nicola Frith\*

*Memories of slavery have long been a contentious subject, but no more so than when the question of reparations is raised. This article investigates French media and political responses to reparations within the context of international movements that are pressurising European and US governments to engage more actively with the legacies of their slave pasts. The particular reference here is to the citizen-led activist group, the Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires, whose call for a national debate on reparations in 2012 and 2013 was rejected by the French state and misrepresented by the French media. These responses are placed within the context of both the (first) Taubira law (2001), which recognised slavery as a ‘crime against humanity’, and the ‘memory war’ of 2005–2006. Nostalgia is shown to intersect with state and media responses in a number of ways. First and foremost, reparations are seen as anti-republican in nature, being misunderstood as the divisive work of ethnic minorities. Fears of communitarian fracture invoke nostalgia for an imagined wholeness that preceded the state’s act of recognition. Secondly, reparations are defined as ‘impossible’ by appealing to their ‘divine’ irreparability. This article challenges the inertia of state nostalgia and the limitations of media representations by reconnecting reparations to a recognition struggle against racial discrimination.*

*Les mémoires de l’esclavage sont depuis longtemps un sujet controversé, et ce d’autant plus quand la question des réparations est soulevée. Cet article examine des réponses politiques et médiatiques aux réparations dans le contexte des mouvements internationaux qui font pression sur divers gouvernements européens aussi bien que sur le gouvernement américain pour qu’ils s’engagent plus activement dans l’héritage du passé esclavagiste. L’article fait référence en particulier au Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires, une association militante dirigée par des citoyens qui, en 2012 et 2013, a fait appel à un débat national sur les réparations qui a été rejeté par l’État français et dénaturé par les médias.*

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*Nous mettons ces réponses dans le contexte de la (première) loi Taubira (2001), qui a reconnu l'esclavage comme 'crime contre l'humanité', aussi bien que 'la guerre de mémoires' (2005–2006). Nous montrerons que la nostalgie traverse ces réponses étatiques et médiatiques à plusieurs niveaux. D'abord et avant tout, l'État et les médias définissent la nature des réparations comme étant contre l'idéologie républicaine en les interprétant erronément comme un travail de division mené par des minorités ethniques. La peur d'une fracture communautariste provoque l'émergence d'un discours nostalgique qui imagine l'existence d'un monde antérieur et bien intégré qui a cessé d'exister avant l'acte de reconnaissance portée par l'État. Deuxièmement, l'État et les médias définissent les réparations comme étant 'impossibles' en faisant appel à la nature irréparable du crime. Cet article conteste l'inertie de cette nostalgie étatique et enquête sur les limites des représentations médiatiques tout en remettant les réparations dans le contexte d'une lutte pour la reconnaissance et contre la discrimination raciale.*

On 10 May 2013, François Hollande gave a speech in the Jardin du Luxembourg in honour of the eighth 'National Day for Remembering the Slave Trade, Slavery and Their Abolitions'. Since 2006, 10 May has fulfilled one of the criteria outlined in the (first) Taubira law (21 May 2001), which not only recognised slavery and the slave trade as 'crimes against humanity', but also stipulated the need to commemorate the abolition of slavery on a yearly basis. Although largely ignored by the national press, this annual event generated unusually high levels of media interest in 2013 owing to the controversies that emerged over the subject of reparations for slavery. On the day of the ceremony, the Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires (CRAN) registered a complaint against a major public financial institution, la Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC), for having administered the debt paid by Haiti to France in return for its independence (1804), and therefore for its complicity in a crime against humanity. This highly political act ensured that 10 May became front-page news, with Hollande's speech offering a subtle, but nonetheless clear, rebuttal to what he termed an 'impossible réparation'; a phrase that he borrowed, rather conveniently, from the Martiniquais politician and poet Aimé Césaire.

The president's refusal can be seen as characteristic of a more general scepticism concerning the subject of reparations, particularly within media and political circles in France. However, it is also a moment that can only be understood by setting it within the broader national and international contexts in which memories of slavery have emerged in response to citizen-led demands for nation-states to begin recognising and repairing the persistent harms of the slave past on contemporary society. It is, therefore, a moment in which to explore the limitations of France's response to the demands of African descendants for recognition and revalorisation within the Republic, while examining more closely the discursive strategies utilised by the state and the media to delegitimise the grounds for a public debate on reparations.

Specifically, this article will position the responses of the media and the state to the CRAN's appeal for a debate on reparations within a nostalgic framework of analysis.

It will focus on the different forms of post-colonial and nationalistic nostalgia that have been materialising alongside recent attempts by the state and civil society to begin confronting France's history of slavery, notably through acts of memorialisation and commemoration. The ways in which nostalgia repeatedly slips in through the back door of public discourses will be shown with reference to two important moments in recent media history: first, the 1998 sesquicentenary of the Abolition Act of 1848, which led to an act of state recognition with the passing of the (first) Taubira law in 2001; and second, the emergence of a highly mediated 'memory war' in 2005–2006 in which the Taubira law became embroiled in broader debates over memories of France's colonial past, and especially those concerning North Africa. Indeed, it is only by exploring this recent counter-attack on memory—or rather attack on 'counter-memory'<sup>1</sup>—that we can understand the latest journalistic and political backlash to reparations.

In this way, reparations will be situated within the specific context of France's socio-political and memorial environment. This will enable us to explore not only *why* reparations remain taboo, but also *how* the construction of this taboo is intimately connected to political and media strategies of representation that serve to misrecognise the meaning of reparations by playing into broader fears of social fracture or 'communautarisme'. It is important not to forget that demands for France to engage fully in acknowledging its historical involvement in slavery originated, in part, from the work of activist groups whose membership includes many from France's overseas departments of Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guyana and Réunion. Yet, their 'demands' are concerned, not with fracture, but with a desire for cultural and historical recognition within the French Republic. It will be argued then that the work of these groups, such as the CRAN, ought to be seen more broadly as part of a 'recognition struggle' in the sense that they have emerged because 'misrecognition or nonrecognition' is applied to 'members of excluded or marginalized groups [who] find their way of life or status as persons denigrated and devalued' (Hobson 2003, 1). The marginalised group to which this article refers can be identified, broadly, as France's black and/or Antillean population, who are united, to quote Ndiaye, by 'une expérience de l'identité prescrite, celle du Noir ... qui a été historiquement associée à des expériences de domination subie' (2008, 57).

What this suggests is that the emergence of memories of slavery, alongside the more recent demands for a debate on reparations, ought to be seen as facets of a much broader struggle to recognise and repair the long-lasting social, cultural and economic effects of France's colonial and slave pasts, and particularly that of racial discrimination. It is only by unpicking the logic of the 'impossibility' that justifies the state's refusal to confront these demands, and by understanding how nostalgia operates as a mechanism for blocking the process of working through the crimes of the slave past, that this article will problematise the discursive field within which reparations have been articulated by media and official discourses to date. Reparations will be reframed as a possible means to move beyond the nostalgic stagnation of state-sanctioned memory and ceremony by exploring, not their

‘impossibility’, but rather their possibility in relation to a long-standing desire for social justice.

### **The Rise in Reparations Movements: An International Perspective**

Reparations must first be situated within a broader international context since the French state’s official rejection has occurred just as calls for reparations are gaining traction on an international scale. Of course, calls for different forms of reparative justice have a history almost as long as slavery itself (Brooks 2004, 4–19), but recent international events have pushed reparations back into the media spotlight. This latest wave might be viewed as the culmination of what Brooks identifies as ‘the modern phase of the black redress movement’ (12). He dates this back to Congressman [John Conyers](#)’s introduction of the ‘H.R. 40: Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act’, which he has reintroduced every year since 1989. Included in this ‘modern phase’ are landmark events, such as the ‘World Conference Against Racism’, held in Durban in 2001, to name but one, which was boycotted by US state representatives because of its focus on reparations. Despite this top-level resistance, since the year 2000, some 14 US states have voted to obligate companies to declare financial gains made from slavery, resulting in offers to provide collective forms of reparation, such as college grants (Tin 2013, 88–94).

France, however, remains (with the exception of Senegal) the only former slaving nation to have decreed slavery a crime against humanity in law. This in turn has provided the legal justification for the emergence of a new network of pro-reparation movements in the overseas departments, with the year 2005 seeing the [Mouvement International pour les Réparations](#) (MIR) in Martinique filing a case against the French state for its role in a crime against humanity. These movements have been spurred and legitimised, in part, by other ‘successes’, such as the long-awaited Mau Mau trial in Britain, which resulted in financial compensation being paid to individuals and the issuing of a formal apology by the British government in 2013 (Elkins 2013). The decision for Caribbean leaders to strengthen their collective claims for reparations using the same law firm (Leigh Day) that won the case for the Mau Mau (Associated Press 2013; Caricom 2013) has resulted in the issuing of a 10-point plan calling the former slaving nations of Europe to engage in a process of reparatory justice (Leigh Day 2014). While the Caricom case is markedly different from that of the Mau Mau—the latter focusing on compensation, while the former calls for a far wider programme of reparative justice that includes everything from a formal apology and debt cancellation to cultural and development programmes, as well as psychological repair—both cases nonetheless suggest that reparations are experiencing a period of re-radicalisation. This movement promises to escalate in the wake of the US’s forthcoming commemoration of the 150th anniversary of its Thirteenth Amendment in 2015, which will provide an important political context in which to revisit the question of



reparations and thus bring about ‘the culmination of a long African American human rights struggle’ (Biondi 2003, 5).

### ‘Restorative Nostalgia’: A Cure for ‘Social Fracture’?

The above summary outlines, albeit briefly, some of the most important transnational and international movements in which calls for reparations have most recently been articulated, including those of Louis-George Tin, the president of the CRAN, in his recent publication entitled *Esclavage et réparations. Comment faire face aux crimes de l’Histoire* (2013). While there is no doubt that reparations movements in France and its overseas departments draw from these broader contexts, an analysis of the discursive knots in which memories of slavery and reparations have become entangled in France additionally requires focusing on what is specific about France’s socio-political and memorial environment. This then means returning to some of the most important historical moments in which memories of slavery have surfaced, notably the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Held throughout April 1998 and placed under the heading ‘Tous nés en 1848’, this national event set the tone for the subsequent commemorations that would be held on 10 May from 2006 onwards. The slogan, explained Lionel Jospin (then prime minister under Chirac), was intended ‘à vous rappeler que vous êtes les héritiers de ce combat’ (Jospin 1998). ‘Tous nés en 1848’ is a small but significant phrase. It operates as a metonym for the French government’s approach to remembering France’s role in slavery by conjoining the metropole and its overseas departments in a celebratory and unifying national narrative centred on the abolitionist figure of Victor Schœlcher. It therefore acts simultaneously as a discursive strategy for distancing the current French Republic and its citizens from any form of post-colonial blame (Frith 2013b, 23–24), recalling the tactics undertaken by the newly elected political powers of Martinique who, from 1848 onwards, considered that ‘Oublier le passé était donner le point zéro d’une nouvelle société qui consolidait leur réussite et portait les promesses de leur reconnaissance sociale’ (Cottias 1997, 300).

While the presidential speeches of 10 May, which have traversed the presidencies of Chirac, Sarkozy and now Hollande, have taken significant steps since 1998 to recognise, for example, the role of the enslaved in their own emancipation, they remain anxiously driven by a desire to connect French national identity to the celebratory narrative of abolitionism. Moreover, their overt promotion of social integration often risks reproducing the language of the colonialist ‘project d’unification sociale’ of post-abolition society (Cottias 1997, 312). Viewed critically, these presidential speeches can be seen as part of a nostalgic process that, while recognising the criminality and dehumanisation of slavery, wishes to save the Republic from the detrimental effects that remembering its past crimes could have on its collective identity today. By associating the Republic with abolitionism, these speeches not only operate as a strategy for eliding the question of reparations, but also for creating the kind of heritage myth described by Kammen as ‘something that suffuses us with pride rather than with



shame' (cited in Boym 2001, xiv). The speeches are therefore nostalgic in the sense that they are 'essentially history without guilt' (to borrow from Kammen), and serve to create what Boym describes as a 'guilt-free homecoming' (xiv). This is experienced, not by exiles living outside of France, but by those living *within* the imagined space of the national border who can only confront the horrors of the past by refuting their continuous effects on the present.

Hollande's presidential speech of 10 May 2014 offers the most recent example of this process (Hollande 2014). It might be seen as part of what Boym has termed elsewhere 'restorative nostalgia.' This, she writes, is typical of 'national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths' (2001, 41). For example, Hollande claims that the re-establishment of slavery under Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, following its belated abolition under the First Republic in 1794, was not part of 'la nation génèreuse et universaliste de la Révolution'. Indeed, 'La France n'est vraiment la France que lorsqu'elle défend des valeurs partout dans le monde.' This familiar construction between French identity and the kind of universal rights that underpinned the abolitionist movement is politically useful in fuelling nostalgic nationalist mythologies. It 'conspires to blur [...] the] official contemporaneity' of slavery, to use Jameson's phrasing, so that the past becomes endowed with 'the spell and distance of a glossy mirage' (1991, 21). This strategy enables the state to avoid confronting the post-1848 history of colonial exploitation, while evading the subject of the financial compensation paid to the former plantation owners under the Second Republic and glossing over the ongoing socio-economic disparities between metropolitan France and its *oultre-mer*, all of which would justify a debate on reparations.

Strategic forgetfulness in the name of national unity is certainly nothing new to the history of slavery. As Cottias notes, the 1848 abolition decree 'a eu pour effet d'enraciner l'oubli de l'esclavage dans le métarécit national en ignorant l'expérience de ce passé esclavagiste' (2005, 59). Only by forgetting the crimes of the past could assimilation and integration be achieved, which suggests that remembering the past is problematic, especially in terms of the state's relationship with its overseas citizens (Garraway 2008, 366). It is not surprising then that the contentious issue of reparations was immediately ejected from the Taubira law (10 February 1999) in the name of political consensus. Article 5 of the proposed law replaced the committee of experts, who were originally charged with examining 'les conditions de *réparation* due au titre de ce crime' (emphasis added; 22 December 1998), with a committee of experts who would guarantee 'la pérennité de la *mémoire* de ce crime' (emphasis added; 10 May 2001). Arguably, this shift from reparations to memory allowed the Republic to maintain its celebratory abolitionist narrative since collective memory, as Rieff points out elsewhere, offers a more malleable political tool for nations to "'revise" and "rewrite"' (2011, 15) their narratives. Conversely, to ratify the state's intention to assess reparations was to risk redefining the state as the criminal perpetrator (Frith 2013b, 24) and thus awaken the spectre of social fracture.

By concentrating on memory, the Taubira law could be unanimously passed, yet that political accord did not last long. From 2005 to 2006, the Taubira law came under direct attack twice: first by a group of historians, spearheaded by Pierre Nora, who demanded the abrogation of all memory laws (12 December 2005);<sup>2</sup> and then by a group of UMP ministers who demanded the abrogation of the Taubira law five days before the first ‘National Day for Remembering Slavery, the Slave Trade and Their Abolitions’ in 2006. These attacks were part of a wider debate instigated by the 23 February 2005 law which famously attempted to rehabilitate France’s colonial past by remembering ‘le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord’. A heated discussion—or what the French media termed ‘une guerre de mémoire’—ensued, dividing those who rejected France’s turn towards memory as ‘repentant’ and anti-republican from those who wished to see an end to France’s silencing of its colonial past (Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire 2006; Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson 2010; Stora and Leclère 2011).

What would become a political and intellectual backlash to the kind of memories, or counter-memories, that challenge the idea of France’s *mission civilisatrice* can be interpreted as nostalgic on two interconnected levels. First and most obviously, the 23 February law points to the presence of a post-colonial or imperial nostalgia that wishes to restore a more positive view of the colonial past in response to the steps taken (such as the Taubira law) to remember the less ‘glorious’ moments of French history. Indeed, the entire period in which the ‘guerre de mémoire’ took place represents an important shift in public consciousness, whereby ‘la souffrance et la nostalgie des pieds-noirs’, which had once been the preserve of the extreme right, now found a home among the more mainstream political parties (Stora and Leclère 2011, 22). As such, it opened up a space for the rejection of counter-memory as an objectionable form of post-colonial repentance.

This rejection intersects with a second form of nostalgia that emerges from a more generalised fear that the Republic and its values are failing and are no longer capable of sustaining narratives of social cohesion. The result is a desire for a return to an (imagined) un-fractured Republic, necessarily rooted in the forgetfulness of its misdeeds, a place where France’s heroic national identity is no longer troubled by histories that it would rather forget. The assumption, to borrow Stauth and Turner’s phrasing, is that there was once a world of unified ‘feeling and communal relations’ that, in giving way to a ‘pluralization of life-worlds [ . . . and ] an intense fragmentation of belief and practice’, makes the former world seem seductively simple (1988, 512–513).

There are many examples that could be used to exemplify this overtly anti-repentant and revisionist nostalgic turn, the best known being Bruckner’s *La Tyrannie de la pénitence* (2006). But equally typical and revealing is the response of the writer and historian Max Gallo. In a text published in the wake of the November 2005 riots and entitled unequivocally *Fier d’être français* (2006), Gallo attacks those who ‘choisissent de se regrouper en communautés ethniques et qui prétendent [ . . . ] se définir comme des “Noirs”, des “Indigènes” opposés aux Blancs, aux descendants de colonisateurs’ (2006, 52). For Gallo, these are not legitimate, activist groups engaging in a recognition struggle against racial discrimination and socio-economic inequality, but

rather fracturing agents that are leading France towards disaster. He laments, 'Honteux de notre passé, nous sommes condamnés non seulement à la repentance, mais à nous désagréger, à nous diviser, à capituler, à mourir dans l'aigreur, l'amertume, la haine, [...] nation balkanisée, violente, livrée aux bandes communautaristes' (132). This minority 'attack' on French national identity triggers nostalgia for a period that preceded the memory laws and is underpinned by a desire to revamp France's lost national pride. His nostalgia for this 'loss' thus arises from a sense of metaphysical exile in which he feels estranged from a republican homeland by being forced to recall histories that challenge national mythologies. The suggestion is that the nation has become a stranger to itself as a direct effect of the divisive behaviour of ethnic minorities. His writings imply a longing to return to a past in which memories of slavery and colonialism were less visible, leading to the uncomfortable conclusion that Gallo's 'restorative nostalgia' wishes to erase the histories and memories that are deemed to belong to the ethnic 'other', and not to the French nation as a whole. Conversely, the ethnic 'other'—the scapegoat here (as elsewhere) for social fracture—must either be assimilated or rejected in a (nostalgic) return to the colonialist-assimilationist discourse that operates under the cover of republican universalism.

### **'Oui à la mémoire, non à la réparation': Media and Political Responses to Reparations**

#### *CRAN's Appeal*

The discursive strategies of 'restorative nostalgia' that reject counter-memory as repentance provide a useful basis for analysing the media's and state's reactions to the question of reparations posed in 2012 and 2013 by the president of the CRAN, Louis-George Tin. By 2012, there had been an important change in presidential leadership. The election of the socialist François Hollande promised a renewed engagement with the slave past in contrast with the strongly 'anti-repentant' stance adopted by Nicolas Sarkozy in response to the 'memory war' of 2005–2006. Under Hollande, two of the highest-ranking positions were given to ministers with direct links to memories of slavery. The position of prime minister was given to Jean-Marc Ayrault, the former *député-maire* of Nantes (France's foremost slave port) and the political voice behind the Mémorial à l'abolition de l'esclavage (inaugurated in March 2012). The position of minister for justice was given to Christiane Taubira-Delannon, the former *député* for French Guiana and author of the 2001 Taubira law. With election promises to support cultural projects that would foreground France's history in colonialism and slavery (Blanchard et al. 2012), the scene appeared to be set for a more active period of memory work.

On 12 October 2012, Tin launched an appeal in *Le Monde* that called for an end to the taboo over slavery reparations by means of a public debate. Signed by a number of political, intellectual and public figures and activists, the appeal was intended to return to the original wording of the Taubira law, referred to as 'un texte de loi amputé', by

discussing ‘de nouvelles actions et politiques publiques, permettant de répondre à l’héritage durable de l’esclavage colonial: racisme anti-Noir, discriminations, inégalités’ (Collectif 2012). Although it was recognised that such a debate would undoubtedly incite a wide variety of reactions, its importance would nonetheless lie in breaking an enduring silence: ‘l’ère du tabou est terminée; l’heure du débat est arrivée’ (Collectif 2012). Echoing MIR’s campaign for ‘Reconnaissance, réparations et réconciliation’, reparations were placed at the very centre of a process that moves beyond the recognition of the Taubira law and towards the goal of reconciliation. As Tin explained, ‘La reconnaissance a été permise par la loi Taubira . . . . La réparation est ce dont nous parlons aujourd’hui. La réconciliation sera l’horizon de ce processus. Mais il n’y aura pas de vraie réconciliation, sans vraie réparation’ (“Esclavage . . .” 2012).

The logic underpinning this desire for reparative justice reproduces that of the economist and social choice theorist, Amartya Sen (2009), who argues that the recognition of a tragedy cannot remain at the ‘observation’ stage, but must move towards a ‘diagnosis of injustice’ (4–5). Yet, as Sen notes, more often than not the ‘placid guardians of order and justice’ (namely the state) work to avoid this diagnostic process, being either ‘unsure of the grounds for action, or unwilling to scrutinize the basis of their policies’ (4). It would appear then that the French state is stuck precisely at this point of stagnation, being reluctant to move beyond recognition and into a diagnostic, as opposed to memorial, phase. Indeed, the actions of the CRAN’s president throw a critical light on the kind of symbolic or moral reparations offered by the French state to date, which might, in a harsh light, be seen as what Trouillot has termed a series of ‘abortive rituals’; that is, ‘the repetition of . . . formulas [ . . . that have] yet to convince the populations involved that the problem has been solved’ (2000, 185). These have included the establishment of an important, yet woefully under-funded, government committee (Comité pour la mémoire de l’esclavage [CPME]),<sup>3</sup> a small stele and sculpture hidden among the trees of the Jardin du Luxembourg, and the 10 May ceremony that was thrice ignored by Sarkozy in 2009, 2010 and 2012.

To move beyond recognition would be to define reparations and identify a legal and social framework in which to bring them into being. This would also require looking at other cases that have dealt with crimes against humanity, while being sensitive to the fact that these have generally taken place within the lifespan of the perpetrators and victims. The most obvious model for slavery, where the crime has been identified retrospectively, is the truth and reconciliation committee. This model has emerged, as Darcy notes, as the ‘common mechanism used in post-conflict or transitional societies’, with some 30 to 40 committees having been held over the past few decades (2011, 43). Not surprisingly, then, Tin also recommends a version of this, which he names ‘un organe “Réparation et réconciliation”’, that would explore ‘les flux financiers—où est passé l’argent de la traite—et quelles pratiques de réparation ont marché dans le monde’ (Henry 2012a). Similarly, Françoise Vergès (the former president of the Comité pour la mémoire et l’histoire de l’esclavage [CPMHE]) speaks of ‘un processus du type “vérité et réconciliation”: on écoute les chercheurs, les experts, les personnes concernées’ (Henry 2012b). This would

not be about creating a binary between ‘victimes contre bourreaux’, but about constructing effective ‘politiques publiques: des programmes de recherche, d’éducation, des manuels scolaires, des centres de documentation, en faisant attention aux populations les plus meurtries’ (Vergès, cited in *Libération*, see Henry 2012b).

The image that we receive here is that reparations remain open to definition and part of a broader process that wishes to work towards societal reconciliation. This requires bringing about effective forms of recognition that probe the links between the history of slavery on the one hand, and contemporary forms of racial discrimination and socio-economic inequality on the other. Reparations are therefore about a broader ‘recognition struggle’; one that is echoed by the CRAN’s overarching aims to fight against ‘les discriminations raciales’, ‘les inégalités sociales’ and ‘les injustices post-coloniales’. Hence the reason that Tin considers reparations as a term that “englobe tout”, c’est en effet la réparation qui “permet de penser l’ensemble du combat antiraciste” (Le Liboux 2013), suggesting that the symbolic form of reparation offered by the Taubira law still needs to be transformed into something with direct societal effects, the conduit for which is no longer simply memory.

### *Political Responses to Reparations*

The possibilities of this debate were entirely misrecognised and misrepresented by both the state and the media. The appeal had been carefully timed to maximise its media impact. It coincided with both Hollande’s visit to Gorée Island—a key site of memory on the UNESCO Slave Trade Route—and the president’s speech in Dakar (Hollande 2012). This speech was intended to outline Hollande’s approach to Africa, while tacitly distancing himself from the neo-colonialist and nostalgic imperialism of Sarkozy’s infamous ‘Discours de Dakar’ (26 July 2007) (“Le Discours...” 2007). Shortly after his address, the press informed Hollande that Ayrault’s government was willing to open up discussions on the topic of reparations: ‘Matignon réfléchit à “réparer” l’esclavage’, ran the headline in *Le Figaro* (AFP 2012). The Élysée advisors mobilised immediately and an urgent response was issued to divert attention away from reparations and back towards Hollande’s key message: ‘Il ne s’agit pas de réparer quoi que ce soit mais de porter notre vision de l’Afrique,’ stated a close advisor in *Le Monde*. ‘On a parlé de la fin de la Françafrique’ (Châtelot 2012).

Faced with this refusal, Tin’s next move was direct action set to coincide with the eighth ‘National Day for Remembering Slavery, the Slave Trade and Their Abolitions’ (10 May 2013). This time, however, the president had been forewarned. Notices in the press had stated that the CRAN was planning an action ‘hautement symbolique’ that would ‘frapper fort en assignant en justice une grande banque française’ suspected of former links to slavery (Le Liboux 2013). The details of the plan were revealed on 10 May, with breaking news that the CRAN had registered a complaint against the CDC for having profited from the slave trade by collecting the debt paid by Haiti to France as financial compensation for its independence following the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804).<sup>4</sup> While this act echoes moves in the US to obligate companies to declare

financial gain made from slavery, its importance (like the 12 October appeal) would lie more in its symbolism and media appeal. ‘Si on fait cette assignation, c’est pour alimenter le débat’, stated the CRAN’s legal advisor, Norbert Tricaud (AFP 2013a). But even if this was little more than a media ‘happening’, as one of Tin’s adversaries commented (*Libération*, May 10, 2013), it nonetheless had a number of immediate effects. First, it ensured full media coverage for the commemoration, an event that normally generates little media attention. Second, it brought the subject of reparations into the public arena for debate at a media level, even if the question at a state level was immediately shut down. Third, it forced Hollande to confront, however indirectly, the subject of slavery reparations in his 10 May speech. What emerged from Hollande’s and the media’s responses to these calls was a dichotomy between the state’s desire to move directly from recognition to reconciliation using memory as its vehicle, contrary to the CRAN’s emphasis on reparations (in its broadest sense) as the sole means of achieving reconciliation.

In this light, Hollande’s speech of 10 May 2013 was less as an act of recognition, or even duty, than an act of political refusal. It tacitly rejected material reparations and reaffirmed the state’s moral commitment to memory, the word ‘réparation’ only appearing once and qualified with the adjective ‘impossible’. As *Libération*’s headline summarised, ‘Oui à la mémoire, non à la réparation matérielle’ (‘Hollande ...’ 2013). The rebuff was structured in three ways. First, Hollande reasserted the state’s commitment to the duty to remember: ‘Le seul choix possible, c’est celui de la mémoire, et c’est la vigilance, et c’est la transmission’ (Hollande 2013). The infamous ‘devoir de mémoire’ operates politically as a reason to avoid talking about other forms of reparation, while positioning the state in a flattering light that frees it from further responsibility. So while calls for reparations have been increasing on the international stage, Hollande’s response opted to focus on the work undertaken by ‘les artisans de la mémoire’ at a specifically local level. The vast majority of his speech is then devoted to listing individual artistic projects, one of which, he announced, would be part funded by the state: *Mémorial ACTe* in Guadeloupe. This large-scale project, currently under construction in Pointe-à-Pitre, is described as a ‘projet emblématique’ that will function as an ‘Œuvre de réconciliation, geste de paix’ (Hollande 2013). In this way, an explicitly regional project is co-opted to perform the role of achieving ‘la paix des mémoires réconciliées’ (Hollande 2013) for France as a whole, while the choice of wording is carefully selected to respond indirectly to the CRAN’s challenge. Yet beneath the promise of this financial commitment (as yet unfulfilled) lies a rather more obvious absence: the continuing lack of a national centre to slavery and colonialism that had been promised under Chirac (see Glissant 2007), shelved under Sarkozy and repeatedly requested by the CPMHE (2013, 63–66).

Secondly, Hollande’s expropriation of *Mémorial ACTe* extends to other political acts. He does not avoid the issue of reparations entirely, but speaks of a debt towards Africa: ‘la dette souscrite à l’égard de l’Afrique’ and ‘la part funeste prise par la France dans l’exploitation des terres d’Afrique’ (Hollande 2013). These are important acknowl-



edgements since they take the unusual step of touching upon French colonialism and not just slavery. However, claims that this debt is being repaid by contemporaneous foreign policies, such as France's military intervention into Mali during 2013, and that this serves to compensate for the 'sacrifice de milliers d'Africains venus ... libérer [la France]' (Hollande 2013), seem opportunistic at best, and are more likely intended to ward off any other reparative claims concerning France's colonial past.

Thirdly, and most significantly, Hollande asserts the impossibility of reparation by reminding us of the inherent irreparability of any 'crime against humanity'. To support his argument, he quotes from Césaire: 'Il y aurait une note à payer et ensuite ce serait fini ... Non, ce ne sera jamais réglé' (Hollande 2013). This quotation has been lifted from Césaire's interviews with Françoise Vergès (2005), a full reading of which provides a far more complex reading of the poet's attitude towards reparations. It is true that Césaire objects to the term 'réparations'—'Essayons d'employer d'autres termes'—but this is because it risks defining Afro-descendants as 'une bande de mendiants' (Césaire and Vergès 2005, 40). Likewise, he rejects the idea of a *single* financial payment because this 'serait trop facile' (38). He nonetheless asserts that the West is answerable to its crimes and has a duty to assist those who have been adversely affected as a result (39–40). This is overlooked by Hollande (2013), who utilises a simplified understanding of Césaire's morally grounded approach to reparations both to repudiate the CRAN's demands for a debate and to undermine the very grounds on which such a debate might take place *a priori*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the decontextualised emphasis on 'une note à payer' encloses reparations within a strictly financial framework, as opposed to offering a more complex and open understanding of its terms.

### *Media Responses to Reparations*

Likewise, the French press has tended to simplify the idea of reparations by boxing them into a number of key misrepresentations and silencing strategies. There are some rare exceptions, notably in *Libération*, which provides more column space than any other newspaper to the subject of slavery. But, broadly speaking, the media limits reparations to three interconnecting tropes: the figure of the Afro-descendant with an individual financial claim against the state; the figure of societal disharmony or fracture; and the figure of anti-republicanism. To take each strategy in turn, there is an automatic assumption that the term 'réparations' signifies a financial transaction for an individual, or group of individuals, as opposed to being understood as a process of psychological, social, cultural and economic repair.<sup>6</sup> *Le Monde*'s headline, for example, ran: 'Réparations *financières* pour les descendants d'esclaves: le casse-tête des arbres généalogiques' (emphasis added; Vincent 2013b). A 'métis' is interviewed to demonstrate the absurdity of these genealogical and transgenerational claims: 'J'aurais bien du mal à demander à ma main droite de compenser ma main gauche ... J'ai un maître et un esclave en moi!' (Vincent 2013b). This is a highly expedient way of dismissing reparations which coincides with Hollande's 'note à payer', since reparations are deemed too complex at a genealogical level. This is, of course, a



perfectly valid argument, but its employment in media and political discourses stems less from ethical considerations—for example, that the suffering of the enslaved cannot, and should not, be quantified monetarily—than from a desire to jettison the need for a debate over how to repair the past. Instead, the misplaced figure of the Afro-descendent claimant is automatically produced and serves to mask a broader translation of reparations that might assert their transformational potential.

Secondly, and in direct contradiction of its defined meaning as ‘corrective’ or ‘restorative’, reparations are represented as being inherently divisive and alienating. *Le Monde*, having initially published the CRAN’s appeal, was especially keen to demonstrate just how little support its action had in 2013. Whereas the 2012 appeal had been endorsed by a number of high-profile public figures and academics, there now appeared a widespread rejection of the debate. ‘La revendication du CRAN suscite cependant peu d’enthousiasme de la plupart des spécialistes,’ stated *Le Monde* (Vincent and Wieder 2013). This split was echoed among the citizen-led associations such as the Comité Marche 98 (CM98). Its president, Serge Romana, whose memory work had been praised by Hollande in his 10 May 2013 speech, published a response to the CRAN in *Le Monde*. In it, he denounced the fact that ‘certaines associations conflictualisent la mémoire de l’esclavage en faisant miroiter l’obtention de réparations financières pour chaque descendant d’esclaves ou encore pour le paiement d’une dette qui assurerait l’indépendance des Antilles. Des revendications qui s’appuient sur un ressentiment anti-français tenace’ (Romana 2013). A few days later, *Le Monde* endorsed Romana’s comments in a report on the inauguration of a memorial to the descendants of the enslaved in Seine-Saint-Denis: ‘Pas d’esprit de revanche chez Chantal Charles-Alfred [one of the attendees]. Comme tous ceux soutenus par le CM98 pour inscrire le nom de leur aïeul sur un des monuments, elle n’a aucune envie d’obtenir par ce biais des “réparations financières”’ (Vincent 2013a). CM98 thus exemplifies the ‘good’ republican association, whose work is focused on memory, unlike the CRAN, whose actions are associated with social fracture and revenge.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, reparations are seen as inherently anti-republican and/or anti-French. This has already been suggested by Romana’s comments which associate reparations with a desire for independence.<sup>8</sup> However, the sense that reparations are somehow inherently ‘anti-French’ can also be found resonating in more populist discourses, and for rather different reasons. This is most clearly expressed in an article published in *Le Figaro* by one of their regular contributors, Eric Zemmour, a far right-wing political journalist whose views on immigration and outspoken racism have seen him prosecuted for inciting racial hatred on more than one occasion, without losing his standing in the public eye.

His response to the idea of reparations is typical of more populist misconceptions. The headline, ‘La France paiera!’, embodies all the fears expressed by public figures, such as Gallo and Bruckner, that France is under attack from an ethnic minority, in this case a ‘black’ minority, that wants to undermine French republicanism and stoke the flames of anti-white racism (Zemmour 2013). Zemmour’s criticism is directed towards the recent publication of Tin’s essay *Esclavage et Réparations* (2013), and

gradually transforms Tin into (his vision of) France's arch-enemy; a minority 'général en chef de la guerre aux phobes' whose sole aim is that 'La norme majoritaire doit mourir, pour que la marginalité devienne la norme' (Zemmour 2013). Tin is the archetype of Zemmour's own phobia, 'la dictature des minorités'; a phrase he borrows from the sociologist Raymond Boudon (2010), who famously described political correctness as 'la tyrannie des minorités'. Under this new 'dictatorship', France risks losing its attachment to traditional values which Zemmour (2013) lists as 'nation, famille, État' in a tripartite structure that is uncomfortably reminiscent of the pro-Nazi Vichy Regime's 'Travail, Patrie, Famille'. Like Gallo, embedded in this rejection of minority claims (reframed here as a form of tyranny) is a tacit desire for the simplicity of a previous time where political correctness—listed as all the 'phobes', including 'Lutte contre les homophobes, les xénophobes, les islamophobes'—did not interrupt his barely disguised desire for a majority white Republic; in other words, for a period when France was the true colonial 'master' and where the old colonial dream of universal assimilation had been realised. Zemmour's repulsion for the imagined threat of a 'minority'-led master nation is thus driven explicitly by his nostalgia for lost national and colonial pride.

The result of these overlapping strategies is to hem reparations into a form of identity politics that reawakens fears of republican fracture. If we place this limited understanding within the context of the original appeal for a public discussion, we can see just how far the media has misrecognised the terms of the debate. Indeed, this process of misrepresentation is typical of the ways in which recognition struggles, more broadly, are misinterpreted as identity politics. This results, as Fraser argues (referring to recognition struggles more broadly), in the creation of reified group identities that encourage 'separatism and group enclaving', while displacing the struggle for the redistribution of resources, land and power (Fraser 2003, 22) that must also be seen as part of the struggle for reparations. As Zemmour's article clearly demonstrates, "'minoritarian" claims' are subsequently 'rejected out of hand', being required instead to assimilate 'to majority norms—in the name of secularism, universalism, or republicanism' (22). What is needed then is not to valorise *group* identities, which might provoke fears of social fracturing, but rather to overcome 'subordination' by finding ways '*to deinstitutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it*' (28; emphasis in original). As this analysis shows, politics and media are a long way from seeing reparations as part of this broader struggle for social and institutional change. Instead, they are interpreted as a minority and identitarian attack on the Republic, invoking nostalgia for the un-fractured past and/or for the old colonial dream of universal assimilation, or rather, cultural dominance.

### Renegotiating Recognition, Reparation and Reconciliation

The privileging of memory by media and political spokespersons—and note that Hollande's views are shared by his political rivals Jean-François Copé (UMP) (Raulin

2013) and Marine Le Pen (Front National) (AFP 2013b)—sets up a dichotomy whereby symbolic forms of reparation (such as memory and commemoration) are placed in opposition to material forms of reparation (understood reductively as financial payments to individual claimants). Memory emerges as the Republic's saviour in a direct reversal of the discourse of 2005–2006, where it was seen as the Republic's divisive enemy. As a public statement issued by the Ministère des Outre-mers following Hollande's speech commented: 'La mémoire et la transmission de la mémoire constituent la seule réparation valable à ce crime contre l'humanité. Elle est infiniment plus importante et unificatrice qu'une compensation financière, toujours source de divisions' (Ministère des Outre-mers 2013). Only this kind of reparation can be deemed 'republican' since it resides in a symbolic realm that can be made to operate in the name of national unity.

It is nostalgia that underpins this institutional striving for 'une mémoire apaisée' (Ministère des Outre-mers 2013). Indeed, the overarching aim of the first government-sponsored CPME (2004–2009) was to overcome social fracture and achieve reconciliation precisely by creating both 'une mémoire partagée' and 'une histoire commune', or 'ce que le philosophe Paul Ricœur a appelé un "récit partagé?"' (CPME 2005, 13–14; see also Frith 2013b). This desire to achieve reconciliation by reaching for a shared memory, and therefore for a shared sense of identity, appears to be threatened by reparations because they are automatically linked to division—victims against persecutors—and reified group identities that are viewed as inherently anti-republican. If memory is the only possible course of action that the government can endorse, then it must be asked whether the nostalgic performance of a shared national memory is capable of affecting social change, notably with reference to racial discrimination and socio-economic inequality in contemporary French society. A positive answer seems all the less likely given that nostalgia underpins state-led acts of commemoration, which have less to do with societal transformation and social justice than about performing reconciliation in the name of national unity. Indeed, this performative aspect is inherent in Chivallon's pertinent observation that 'la mémoire de l'esclavage vient au secours du modèle républicain par la démonstration formidable qu'elle formule de la prise en compte de la demande "communautaire"' (2012, 54).

To date, the state's responses have failed to engage with the inalienable fact that crimes against humanity operate within an international juridical framework that is rooted in the Nuremberg Trials. To follow Derrida (1999), although all crimes are inherently irreparable in the sense that they are crimes committed against the sacredness of humanity itself, juridical frameworks nonetheless reach out towards some form of reparation and reconciliation by offering practical and 'earthly' (as opposed to sacred) responses to that which is impossible. Derrida sees this as an important part of a broader 'urgence universelle de la mémoire' that desires reconciliation with the crimes of the past, notably after Auschwitz. As such, 'le concept de "crime contre l'humanité" reste à l'horizon de toute la géopolitique du pardon', being a form of societal 'forgiveness' (or reconciliation) that can *only* enter human institutions by attaching to it certain achievable conditions. This represents a different

process of forgiveness to that which is divine and unconditional, meaning that, for Derrida, a distinction needs to be made between a pure and unconditional pardon on the one hand, and what might more accurately be termed a ‘processus de réconciliation’ on the other.

In borrowing from Césaire, Hollande (2013) rightly notes the impossibility of repairing the crime of slavery. He therefore positions the crime beyond the realms of reparative justice (which requires that the punishment fit the crime), suggesting that it demands an act of forgiveness so all-embracing that it can only be divine. However, his instrumentalisation of the phrase ‘réparation impossible’ also works to gloss over the important fact that his speech is framed by a juridical (not a religious) framework—the Taubira law—which is implicitly linked to human rights justice and reparations, even if its goal is primarily memorial. Despite their seeming impossibility, reparations, in more than just a symbolic form, ought to be at least considered since they offer the only possible course of action that contains end goals that are social, political, moral and psychological, rather than spiritual. Without this practical approach, the French government is only dealing with the abstract symbolism of recognition couched in a quasi-religious language that attests to a crime for which there is no earthly institution capable of providing Derrida’s unfettered pardon for the crimes of the past.

We might see the Taubira law as offering one such a human and political response to demands to recognise the history of slavery and the slave trade, but it does not provide a practical way to move beyond that legal recognition by addressing the nefarious effects of slave history on contemporary society. Such an approach would challenge the ‘everyday institutionalized patterns and practices that deny social groups participatory citizenship’ in order to ‘constitute different varieties of collective “we” than the norms that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when these polities were formed’ (Hobson 2003, 3). If the CRAN, and notably its leader Louis-George Tin, have emerged in recent years as an outspoken and controversial activist group, this is not simply because of its emphasis on ‘black’ identity (which is anathema to republican models of neutrality), but also because it calls for the state to move beyond memory and towards these kinds of reparative actions.

As this article has shown, the strategies used to delegitimise reparations operate by legitimising memory as the moral and republican response to the crimes of the past, one that has the additional advantage of feeding into mythologies of nation building. In this way, the ‘abortive ritual’ (Trouillot 2000) of commemoration becomes less about recognition than about nostalgia, creating what Boym terms ‘a comforting collective script for individual longing’ that aims to establish ‘social cohesion, a sense of security and an obedient relationship to authority’ (2001, 42). At the same time, the transformation of a recognition struggle into identity politics not only evokes nostalgia for a less complicated and more unified past, but should also be seen as a political strategy for non-action at an institutional level; that is, for action that remains symbolic and memorial, as opposed to practical and transformational. Reparations then should be seen as the very opposite of inaction since they pull us away from a top-down politics of symbolism and towards a bottom-up politics of

action. This is not to dismiss the importance of acts of recognition, but rather to state that memory must be accompanied by real policies to confront racial discrimination and socio-economic inequality, or risk being consumed by the nostalgia of republican nationalism.

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## Notes

- [1] Counter-memory here refers to a memory that works against official versions of history (Chivallon 2012, 115).
- [2] Full details can be found on the website of Nora's association, *Liberté pour l'Histoire*: <http://www.lph-asso.fr/>.
- [3] The original Comité pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage (2004–2009) under Maryse Condé was renamed Comité pour la Mémoire et l'Histoire de l'Esclavage (2009–2012) under Françoise Vergès, and has just been renamed Comité National pour la Mémoire et l'Histoire de l'Esclavage (CNMHE) under Myriam Cottias to clearly distinguish its work from that of an association (CMPHE 2013, 56).
- [4] See the CRAN's website for a list of similar acts designed to bring the French state to account: <http://www.le-cran.fr/index.html>.
- [5] For an analysis of Sarkozy's appropriation of Césaire, see Frith (2013a).
- [6] Both the appeal of 12 October 2012 and Caricom's 10-point plan are examples of a far more open understanding of reparations.
- [7] Romana was a member of the first CPME (2004–2009), but left in protest against the Comité's selection of 10 May in honour of the Taubira law and not, as he wished, the march of 23 May 1998, which was instrumental in mobilising political support for the Taubira law (see [http://www.cm98.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=48&Itemid=57](http://www.cm98.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48&Itemid=57)). On 2 May 2008, Romana succeeded in gaining official recognition for 23 May, with a public decree setting this date aside for the descendants of the enslaved to mourn their ancestors. Romana is once again part of the new CNMHE.
- [8] Romana is likely referring to MIR, run by the politician Garcin Malsa, one of the founding members of a political independence movement 'La Parole du Peuple' (now the Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais).

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